Chapter 5

THE ISOLATION OF ELDERLY PEOPLE

The aim you must have in view, is to honor Our Lord Jesus Christ, serving Him in the needy poor as you did when assisting the poor war refugees who came fleeing to Paris, and the poor of the HOLY NAME OF JESUS.
Saint Vincent de Paul

Beggars in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

As early as the sixteenth century, the increase of misery and the indifference manifested in works of charity had keenly preoccupied people.

With various shades of difference, everyone desired the repression of wandering beggars, the punishment of the pseudo-poor and a rational organization of welfare under the direction and control of municipal authority. The truly poor were to be encouraged to work while the handicapped were to be helped. As for strangers, it was customary to chase them from the city.¹ For the principal purpose of struggling against the terrible scourge of mendicity the Grand Bureau of the Poor was founded.²

However, the general disorganization, an aftermath of the religious wars, was for a long time a hindrance to the re-establishment of public prosperity. This struggle against mendicity remained a concern and a problem for the following century, so much so that at the beginning of the reign of Louis XIII, the thought of “enclosing the poor” still haunted the people. A life of insecurity and of perpetual alarm only increased the number of vagabonds.

Police Regulations

In 1611, the statutes of hospitals for enclosed poor people were drawn up. These specified the allocation of necessary food and the organization
of appropriate work according to sex and age. For some time these measures produced marvels but once the first feeling of fear had fallen, the beggars ventured forth once again into the streets of the city. Severe sanctions were soon proclaimed; whipping, neck chains and the galleys for men; whipping and the shaving of the head for women. Once again, fear restrained the beggars for about four years. At the beginning of the year 1617, they were back again in the streets. A pamphlet published that year speaks of them in the following manner:

Hospitals are filled with poor people, most of them soldiers, black lackeys, peasants, men and women beggars so much so that it is not possible to speak of any business or even to say a Pater Noster without three or four interruptions. They are blaspheming the name of God, uttering outrageous and harmful words and the people are murmuring strangely about the great number of those people. On seeing alms boxes for the enclosed or for the blind and others, people say that these are lies assuming the form of compassion and that there really are no longer any enclosed.

Two years later a decree of the Court of Parliament dated November 29, 1619, attempted to remedy this by ordering the enclosure of the poor in a house called the Petit-Bourbon, situated in the Faubourg Saint-Jacques. A decree of 1622 also refers to a house of the Faubourg Saint-Marcel, destined for the enclosure of the poor:

Considered by the Court was the request presented by the Procureur General of the King that to make up for a part of the expense for the rent of five hospitals for enclosed poor numbering 1,300 or 1,400, there has been proposed the purchase of a house situated in the Faubourg Saint-Marcel.

In 1629 and again in 1630, Parliament recalled its prohibition of former years but beggars were too fond of their liberty and of their idleness to heed the warning.

Good will certainly was not lacking in those who tried to solve the problem of mendicity, for a new decree of the Court of Parliament dated July 16, 1632, proclaimed the establishment "of a general hospital in which poor of all conditions might be conveniently lodged." Whether the preamble of these ordinances referred to charity or to good order, the conclusion was ever the same, "beggars constitute a social danger. They must be enclosed."

While these projects failed to be carried out, the number of beggars
during the week, they received nothing. To poor strangers in Mâcon lodging was given for one night. On the morrow, they were sent away after having received two sols.

To provide the necessary funds for this good work, the rich pledged themselves in writing to give each year wheat, wine, meat, wood, and clothing. According to the testimony of Father Desmoulines, Superior of the Oratory at Mâcon, “Vincent knew so well how to manage both the great and the lowly that each one willingly contributed to such a good work, some in money, others in wheat or in other food products, according to their possibilities in such a way that more than 300 poor people were lodged, fed and provided for quite reasonably. Vincent contributed the first alms himself and then withdrew.”

In Paris

It was thus that Saint Vincent de Paul had happily solved the problem of mendicity in Mâcon in 1621. But in Paris, the situation was quite different and the remedy much more difficult to discover. He turned then toward his co-worker, and according to their little means, Monsieur Vincent and Mademoiselle LeGras sought a solution to suppress mendicity in the city, which would certainly be a means of making themselves useful to the poor. Their attempt, simple as it was, was to end in the founding of the Hospice of the Holy Name of Jesus, which would serve as a home for poor workmen whom old age or infirmity prevented from earning their livelihood.

The biographers of Saint Vincent de Paul give for the most part the principal details of the establishment of this work which was made possible, thanks to the generosity of a bourgeois of Paris. Feeling interiorly disposed to serve God in the person of the poor, this citizen of Paris brought a sum of one hundred thousand livres to Vincent for a good work for which he left the choice to him. These authors point out, among other facts, the purchase of a house of The Holy Name of Jesus in the Faubourg Saint Laurent, acquired by the Congregation of the Mission on September 28, 1647. It was to be used according to the conditions of the contract, “to house, feed and clothe forty persons of both sexes and to teach them the things necessary for salvation, to make them live in the fear of God and His love, and also to occupy them in some work, thus causing them to avoid begging and idleness which are the mother of all vices.”
Likewise quoted is the approbation given to the work by His Excel­lency, the Archbishop of Paris, on March 16, 1654, and that of the king in the month of November of the same year. His Majesty recognized this new Hospice dedicated, as it were, to God. For that reason he freed it from all taxes on food, "in exchange for which, the poor therein should recite every day of the week the Exaudiat for our prosperity and that of our successors, as well as for preservation and peace in our state."16 1653 is the date given unanimously for the opening of the hospice which received and lodged forty poor workmen, twenty of each sex, in two separate buildings separated from each other but so well arranged that both men and women assembled in the same Chapel to hear Mass without either seeing one another or speaking to one another.

Louise de Marillac Organizes the Hospice of the Holy Name of Jesus

The important role played in this enterprise by Louise de Marillac is almost completely neglected by those biographers. It is especially by showing the action of Louise in this work, that we should like to point out once again her practical common sense and organizing genius as well as her supernatural spirit which, while desiring to bring a purely human solution to the misery of poor old people worthy of care, ever took into account in the first place the state of their soul. It is in this matter especially that her manner of looking at things like that of Saint Vincent differed essentially from that of the state.

Not Force but Service

The idea of forced labor and of enclosure as a punishment for incorri­gible beggars had already failed in previous attempts of the government. According to Paultre, enclosure as a punishment for incorrigible beggars was characteristic of the century.17 It was repugnant to Vincent and Louise who were especially conscious of the liberty of the poor, and respected their dignity. Work to them was an excellent means of reaction against solitude and loneliness which are the great suffering of old age. In order to reduce this moral suffering and to lighten their impression of being
useless and powerless, Monsieur Vincent and "Mademoiselle" foresaw on their part a voluntary work of such a nature as to keep the aged busy, "according to their strength and ability in order to avoid idleness."\(^{18}\)

To organize and to carry out the work, the holy priest turned as ever to his faithful collaborator for advice. He had considered the matter before God; she did likewise.

**Supernatural View at the Basis of the Work**

Providence had manifested its wishes by means of the donation of a rich citizen of Paris. Again God was consulted upon the aim to be attained and the means to be employed. A note written by Saint Louise and preserved in the Archives of the Rue du Bac throws light on the subject:

As I wanted to consider that work before God, it occurred to me to look at it from all angles; its beginning, its continuation and its end.\(^{19}\)

Seeing the work "inspired by God" and not according to man’s designs, she found its end excellent "because it pertained to the glory of God by the carrying out of His Holy Will, since man was ordered to earn his bread by working," and she entrusted it entirely to Him and then recommended it to the prayers of her Daughters "so that His Holy Will might be accomplished."\(^{20}\)

**The Work is Organized**

Ever concerned about the human person, Louise foresaw the double advantage, namely the moral and material one, which the good use of their time would bring to the hospitalized. Working according to their physical strength, they would not feel useless to society and, at the same time would help provide for their maintenance. The question therefore was to find them occupations suited to their ability and which would also bring in some income, such as: weaving and shoemaking for the men, and glove-making and lingerie for the women.\(^{21}\)

Whether these old people were themselves experts in these trades, or whether they were taught them, the fact is that already long before our century, we see the work of re-education initiated. To make it as success-
ful as possible, Louise did not hesitate to make an appeal to the most skillful artisans of the time, begging them to condescend through charity to spend six months among their unfortunate aged brethren to teach them, pretending that they too were poor inmates. In other cases, they were not asked to contribute their services as charity but they were engaged as a group of salaried instructors.

Saint Louise did not stint in anything. "Having secured a fairly good number of artisans to set the work on foot and keep it going, we must not be stopped by the cost necessary for purchasing the tools and materials nor by the difficulties of finding advantageous dealers. Divine Providence will not fail us in anything."22

To know how to keep elderly people occupied is really the sovereign remedy to moral suffering so keenly felt by some of them. Louise remarked that the good resulting from the work, "for the spiritual as well as for the temporal benefits will depend upon the fact that no one will be useless especially in the beginning."23

It is interesting to note that in the twentieth century, at the seventh Congress of Hospitals held in 1951, Professor Pierre Delore, when giving his report on "The Hospital Problems of the Sick and the Aged" pointed out as an excellent innovation that "at the request of the elderly, social assistance could provide some employment suited to their capacities and find a market for these little projects made by them."24

Choice of the Hospitalized Persons

Saint Louise attached great importance to this, especially in the beginning, in order to succeed in creating that atmosphere of peaceful serenity in which she wished to establish those elderly poor persons.

As this work is a great one, she wrote, it is important to establish it on good and solid foundations, in order to make it as perfect as possible and of lasting duration. Therefore, it seemed to me that the persons chosen for it should be upright and not exactly beggars.25 It would seem appropriate that, once the selection is made, those persons should be made to understand the importance of the resolution they have taken.26

These persons must be free to come of their own accord, and not be compelled to do so. They must be individuals who have nobody, for if they have a family, the duty of caring for them is incumbent on its
members. Under the plea of charity, it would not truly be the proper thing
to isolate them from family life.

In order to facilitate the choice, she suggested that charitable persons
should be present to see those who would present themselves, to help
judge their selection and to obtain “sufficient information about their lives
and morals.” Once again Louise anticipated our modern methods of
social investigation as well as the need of administrative advisory boards
responsible for admissions and dismissals.

The Administrative Council naturally included Vincent and two citi­
zens chosen by him: in the beginning, a Councillor of the King, auditor
in his accounting office, and a dry goods dealer of Paris. Good judgment
was shown in that selection: a lawyer and a merchant would insure the
right management!

**Financing of the Project**

Saint Louise, whose life belonged entirely to God, was also a very
practical woman and had plans for establishing the new enterprise on a
solid basis.

“The Daughters of Charity must be good accountants” was one of
the recommendations of Saint Vincent, and Louise was the very first to
set the example in this. The Archives of the Rue du Bac preserve in
Louise’s firm handwriting the “register of the expenses incurred for those
poor working people of the Holy Name of Jesus.” It was begun in the year
1653: “ordinary expenses, extraordinary expenses,” everything was re­
corded exactly... What precision and concern about justice in giving to
each one what was due to him!

Nothing was neglected so that the price paid the working people might
be “the just price.” She herself wrote to Saint Vincent to that effect:
Request the person who takes the trouble to have the goods
fulled, to tell you what price the working men of her district
receive for the fulling of serge; what they receive for carding and
combing the wool; what they receive for spinning it, both on the
large and on the small spinning wheels. This will facilitate the
accounting with the working people, because the prices of Paris
are too high, and because everything there costs so much more.

Then follows a remark full of wisdom and experience: Each worker
was to receive one-fourth of the price agreed upon for his work, from
which a deduction would be made for the amount of wine he had drunk.
Thus, John Guesnet saw his earnings decreased by nearly five *livres* for his wine; John de Lestre, instead of receiving his nine *livres*, eight *sols*, only got six *livres*, fifteen *sols*. John Ollier who had made 118 yards of goods at the price of four *sols* a yard could not get any of his salary because he had spent more on wine than he had earned! The women were better managers of their earnings.

All these details are in the handwriting of Louise. Is it not an encouragement for those who have to balance accounts today? Louise knew how to foresee, combine and compute: she would have been able to justify, in case of an inspection, how each person required 165 *livres* a year. In one of her letters to Sister Barbara Angiboust, she inquired as to the best time to “take in her provision of flax strands for spinning, of which four to five hundred pounds were needed, whether it could be purchased at a good bargain and whether the cost of transportation could be kept low.”31 In those humble household concerns Louise knew how to show her effective love of God served in the Poor.

### The “Family Atmosphere”

The first old people admitted, twenty men and twenty women, entered in March 1652. “The little family,” Saint Louise wrote to Saint Vincent “did not fail to assemble except for one of each sex who had not yet arrived. But I think, Father, that it will be necessary that you take the trouble of coming tomorrow morning to establish them and have them participate in some devotion, such as venerating the Holy Cross with some talk on the Passion.”32

It is to be noted that the wishes of the founder had not stopped merely at material assistance. That good citizen had said to Saint Vincent: “Father, it is not merely to relieve misery that I give my property to the poor for their upkeep; my desire is moreover, that they be instructed and taught the things necessary for their salvation.”33 On October 29, 1653, after several months of trial, that intention was written in the contract signed by the benefactor and Vincent. A Priest of the Mission was to be in charge of the religious service. Louise, who always looked ahead, was careful to notify the Reverend Pastor of Saint-Laurent about that arrangement “so that he may have no reason for complaint.”34 Once again Louise manifested wisdom in forestalling possible conflicts, by consideration of the justified claims of every one.
Saint Vincent wished to give the first talk himself. What a model of psychology and of the most tender charity that informal talk was! After saying the rosary together, Saint Vincent began:

My children, I think it would be pleasing to God if we had a little talk about Christian doctrine and so I am going to ask you questions about the principal mysteries of Faith and about the sign of the cross. But you must not be surprised if you do not know how to make it well. Oh! no, my children, but you must do your best to learn well.35

He had no public humiliations for these unfortunate ones but only encouragements:

I am going to begin to question you, but if you cannot answer very well, don't get disturbed for that matter. I am going to ask you whether you know how to make the Sign of the Cross properly and should it be that you do not know how to bless yourself, don't feel bad about it. You are not the only ones. How many there are at court, perhaps even presidents, who do not know how to bless themselves.

To be compared to presidents, what an honor—even in the sharing of ignorance!

One after the other blessed himself, and when it was necessary, Vincent corrected the awkward or incomplete gesture.

Then, he began to speak of the principal Mysteries. Well aware how fond old people are of children, he selected a little boy to bring back to these memories rusted by time, the lessons of their youth: tactful charity of his! The good old people eagerly listened to that little fellow answering Saint Vincent:

"Who is God, my child?"

"Father, He is the Creator of heaven and earth and Lord of all things."

"Fine, that's a good answer: He is the Creator of heaven and earth. What do you understand by these words: Creator of heaven and of earth?"

"I understand that it is He Who made all things."

After this Saint Vincent developed these truths in his simple and lively manner:

Yes, when we say 'Creator of heaven and earth' we mean The One who made everything. You must remember that, my children. When you hear it said, you will remember that Creator means the same as saying The One who made everything. But you may say: 'Has God made everything that is on the earth?"
Yes, He has made all. 'But, Father, has God made all the different creatures we see?' He has made all that for the service of man. There isn’t the tiniest creature that He hasn’t made, even the smallest of insects.36

He did not grow tired repeating and having them repeat, always in his kindly way, stimulating if necessary by some little praise. All the while he would be explaining very precisely the doctrine. Then came the turn of one of the elderly:

"Who is God?"

"He is the Creator of heaven and earth," she answered.

"What does Creator mean? What does creating something mean?"

"It means making something out of nothing."

"Oh! you are very smart, my dear—"

Vincent would then draw practical conclusions: since God has made all things, then it is from Him that you who live at the "NAME OF JESUS" have received all that you have. How many people would consider themselves happy if they had the fare which you enjoy.

How many poor field laborers, who work from morning to evening, are not so well fed as you are! And this should cause you to work with your hands as long as you can do so according to your strength, very far from thinking: 'I don’t have to worry about doing anything, since I am assured that I shall want for nothing.' Ah! my children, you must beware of thinking thus and rather consider that you must work for the love of God, since He Himself gives you that example, working unceasingly for us.37

Thus encouraged and assisted even without realizing it, these hospitalized elderly people really enjoyed "the peace of eventide," and the thought of Louise that "God had designs upon this beginning" was being verified. "Murmuring and detraction," so Abelly mentions, "were banished together with other vices. The poor attended to their little occupations and to the religious duties applicable to their condition."38 The desire of the Founder was well respected, according to the exact terms of the contract:

"To house, feed, clothe forty persons of both sexes and teach them the things necessary to salvation, endeavoring to make them live in the fear of God and in His love, as also to keep them occupied at some work and thus combat begging and idleness which are the mothers of all vices."

Provided with the looms and tools, the hospitalized were able to work according to their strength and their abilities. Owing to the wisdom of the
regulations, the presence of the sisters, and the good organization estab­lished by Louise, joy, peace, union, and order reigned in the Hospice, so much so, that there was a long waiting list of those who longed to be admitted. Priority was given to the relatives of the Priests of the Mission and of the sisters. Only two months after the installation of the first inmates, Saint Louise wrote to Sister Cecile Angiboust, requesting her to tell Sister Elizabeth that “her cousin Brocard passed away in a most Christian manner. Vincent saw him two or three times during his illness because we put him in a hospital for working people, which has been started in this district.” Some years later, it was Vincent who notified Father Tholard, C.M., that his “good sister is at the NAME OF JESUS with the aunt of Father Gorlidot.”

These details of charity from the life of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise bear witness to the fact that in the very first stages of the Company, the founders knew how to share tactfully the family interests of their sons and daughters, alleviating them when they could do so.

Extension of the Work

The good repute of the Hospice of the Holy Name of Jesus not only drew “Clients” but it also encouraged the establishment of similar hos­pices.

The Ladies of Charity had come frequently to the establishment, where the sight of forty old people living in union and peace offered a striking contrast to the disorganized crowd of mendicants filling Paris and proving to be such a shame and such a danger in the kingdom. The Ladies wondered if Vincent and Louise couldn’t undertake a hospice of the Holy Name of Jesus on a large scale where they might lodge all the poor people of Paris and then the poor of the kingdom. Before broaching the matter to Vincent, they consulted his collaborator.

In reply to their question as to whether or not women alone might undertake such a project, Louise gave them a clear-sighted reply filled with wisdom:

If this work is considered political, it seems that men should be the ones to undertake it, but if it is to be considered a work of charity, women may undertake it in the same manner in which they have undertaken the other great and painful exercises of charity which God has approved by the blessings He has placed on them.
At first glance she saw the work under its double aspect of "politics" and of "charity." With remarkable foresight, she stated the conditions by which the work might be undertaken by the Ladies of Charity and still remain within the scope of work which formed the aim of their association. She then listed the conditions to which they must submit themselves to make their action useful and fruitful:

That the women should undertake it alone, it seems that that should not be. It would seem preferable that some devout men, whether members of a company or individuals, might be their helpers, to give advice and to take action in judiciary proceedings, which might be necessary to maintain all these different types of people in their duty on account of the diversity of minds, customs and dispositions.42

Louise already foresaw the difficulties which they would have to overcome as time went on. The eagerness and the determination of the ladies who wished to precipitate everything did not suit either Louise or Vincent, for whom "the works of God are carried out little by little and almost imperceptibly."43 Although it was he who asked Queen Anne of Austria for the house and the enclosure of the Salpetrière for the work to be undertaken, he carried out his plans too slowly to satisfy the ladies who could not understand his apprehension and his delay. While they became impatient with his indecision, he was deploring their thoughtless ardor and he exhorted them to moderate their zeal.

"We now have a lodging, we have some funds, some linens, some utensils and the rest will certainly come in good time. Why delay any longer? Let us invite the poor to come willingly. If they refuse, we shall force them to come." Thus reasoned the ladies. On the contrary, Louise and Vincent preferred to begin in a small way and to progress by degrees. Force was repugnant to them.

They were not understood and the work undertaken through force did not produce the results which the ladies expected. It was far too great for what the ladies had hoped to undertake. It finally came to their yielding to the administrators named by the king. However, they gave a beautiful example of disinterestedness by the disposition which they showed in being willing to continue to render service in the work in the measure in which those in charge would judge it wise to employ them.44

The little hospice of forty old people had served as plan and model for that immense hospital which for so many years has served as a shelter for innumerable unfortunate ones.
What a beautiful testimony to the action of Louise for the aged in having been chosen as model and guide of an association of youth of the twentieth century devoted to poor and lonely aged!

That association, under the title of “Louise de Marillac,” was officially established in 1909 in the parish of Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet, an old district of Paris where, 300 years ago, their patroness had begun her visits to the poor and the sick.

In 1915, nineteen groups of the association already existed in Paris and 405 “Louisettes” were alleviating the suffering of poor old grandmothers left without resources. Today, they are spread throughout the world.

Penetrated with the supernatural spirit, the “Louisettes” learned to seek contact with the poor in whom they serve Christ. Their prayer sums up the spirit of the model which must animate them.

Lord, I am going to find one of those whom you have called another self. Grant that the gift I bring to him or to her and the heart with which I give it might be welcomed by my unfortunate brother or sister.

Grant that the time spent near him or her as I try to bring some good may be for both of us fruits of productive eternal life.

Lord, bless me by the hand of your poor; Lord, smile on me by the smile of your poor; Lord, welcome me one day in the holy company of your poor.